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INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
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RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, SCA/PPD, DRL

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: STATE AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA HIGHLIGHT
USCIRF DELEGATION'S VISIT TO TURKMENISTAN

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) delegation's August 20-25, 2007 visit to Turkmenistan, headed by Michael Cromartie, received positive state and international media. However, state media avoided any frank discussion of religious freedom issues within Turkmenistan. Nevertheless, the mention of the former chief mufti Nasrulla ibn Ibadullah, who was pardoned and released from prison only a few days prior to the USCIRF delegation, is perhaps the most significant step in that direction, thus far. In addition, international media accurately carried quotes from post's August 24 press release. END SUMMARY.

STATE MEDIA ANNOUNCES USCIRF DELEGATION'S ARRIVAL

¶2. (U) On August 19, the "Watan" TV news program (Turkmen) announced the delegation's arrival in Turkmenistan and provided some details of their planned visit, including their meeting with President Berdimuhamedov. The following day, state dailies "Neutral Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 39,091) and "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 28,091), including Russia based pro-government website "turkmenistan.ru" (Russian, English) and government website "Turkmenistan Golden Age" (Turkmen, Russian, English), carried an article with content similar to the "Watan" news program. (NOTE: "Watan" re-broadcast the same news content three times the following day. END NOTE.)

STATE AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA HIGHLIGHT DELEGATION'S MEETING WITH
TURKMEN PRESIDENT

¶3. (U) On August 20, the "Watan" TV news program (Turkmen) praised President Berdimuhamedov's meeting with the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom delegation, noting that the sides exchanged opinions regarding religious organizations' activities and underlined the importance of dialogue among religious faiths as an inviolable factor of mutual understanding and harmony among people in the world. The broadcast noted that the Commission gave a high assessment to the President's recent pardon of 11 imprisoned citizens of Turkmenistan. Positive and accurate Turkmen language interpretation of comments by Cromartie and other delegation members followed. The following day, state dailies "Neutral Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 39,091) and "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 28,289)

on their front pages, as well as Russia-based pro-government website "turkmenistan.ru" (Russian, English) and government website "Turkmenistan Golden Age" (Turkmen, Russian, English), carried an article with content similar to the "Watan" news program. In subsequent days, state weekly "Nesli" (Turkmen, circ. 22,791) reprinted the articles from state dailies, while state weeklies "Ahal Durmushy" (Turkmen, circ. 34,091), "Balkan" (Turkmen, circ. 25,630), "Esger" (Turkmen, circ. 59,091) and "Turkmen Dunyasi" (Turkmen, circ. 33,741) gave front-page treatment to the same articles.

14. (U) On August 21, the Russian news agency "Interfax" (Russian, English) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (English), in reference to state media, also covered the delegation's meeting with President Berdimuhamedov. Both reported the delegation's praise for the president's decision to release the 11 imprisoned citizens. RFE/RL in particular highlighted that the delegation welcomed the pardoning of Turkmenistan's former chief mufti Nasrulla ibn Ibadullah. RFE/RL also reported that the Commission's early 2007 report accused Turkmenistan of continued systematic and egregious violation of freedom of religion or belief. (COMMENT: RFE/RL reported that Ibadullah objected to late-president Niyazov's order to use passages from the "Ruhnama" - Niyazov's "book of the soul" - during Muslim religious services. In addition, Ibadullah had angered the late president, opposing death sentences after secret trials of suspects who were accused in the 2002 attack on Niyazov's motorcade. END COMMENT.)

STATE MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS THE DELEGATION'S VISIT TO COUNCIL ON RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

15. (U) On August 22, the "Watan" TV news program (Turkmen) highlighted the delegation's meeting at Turkmenistan's Council on Religious Affairs. The broadcast noted the delegation's meeting with Ibadullah at the council, who praised President

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Berdimuhamedov's policy in his interview. Ibadullah praised Turkmenistan as a homeland of flourishing democracy where human rights were protected reliably. In conclusion, the news broadcast reported favorably on the delegation's other meetings, listing the names of ministries and agencies. (COMMENT: Ibadullah is one of 11 citizens pardoned in early August, 2007. END COMMENT.) The following day, state dailies "Neutral Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 40,091) and "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 29,091) carried a front page article with similar content. On August 24, government website "Turkmenistan Golden Age" (Turkmen, Russian, English) posted an article that carried information along the lines of the "Watan" August 22 news program. (Note: "Watan" news program re-broadcast the same news content three times the following day. End note.)

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA POSITIVE ON THE VISIT AND ACCURATELY CARRY EMBASSY PRESS RELEASE

16. (U) Associated Press (AP) (English, Russian) August 25 and Reuters (English, Russian) August 24 articles accurately covered the delegation's visit to Turkmenistan. Both agencies reported the delegation's judgment that there has been an improvement in religious freedom and human rights. The delegation hoped, nevertheless, for further reform and improvement. Both agencies, in reference to the embassy press release, accurately carried quotes by Commissioner Donald Argue and delegation head Michael Cromartie. On August 27, Russia-based "Moscow Times" (English) accurately carried an article with mixed content from Associated Press and Reuters articles.

17. (U) COMMENT: State media carried broad and favorable coverage of the USCIRF delegation visit including their meeting with President Berdimuhamedov. Although State media did not discuss religious freedom problems in Turkmenistan, the mention of the former chief mufti Nasrulla ibn Ibadullah, who was recently released, is perhaps the most significant step in that direction thus far. International media highlighted the USCIRF visit to Turkmenistan and noted the delegation's expressed appreciation for improvements. However, only AP and Reuters mentioned the delegation's continued concerns for improved human rights and

religious freedom, thanks in large measure to the embassy press
release and contact with local stringers for these two news wires.

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